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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000933

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/19/2017

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: AFTERMATH: TRIPLE-MURDER OF CHRISTIAN BOOKSTORE

WORKERS IN MALATYA

REF: A. ADANA 56

1B. 06 ISTANBUL 044

1C. 06 ANKARA 522

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4(b),(d)

1.(C) Summary: News of the April 18 murder of three Christian bookstore workers by ultranationalist teens spread like wildfire across Turkey, and has dominated news and public conversations. The Turkish government, media, and civil society expressed shock and condemned the attacks. Several Christians in Turkey, including some Amcits, contacted the Embassy to express fears of copycat attacks. Many newspaper columnists blamed politicians for failing to beat back rising intolerance, which they argued also led to the February murder of Turkish-Armenian writer Hrant Dink (reftel B) and the stabbing of a Catholic priest in Trabzon last year (reftel C). The public debate so far has been encouragingly constructive. As with the Dink killing, we will urge the GOT to use this tragedy to promote greater tolerance. The public debate may be short-lived, however; the final days of the tense presidential election may steal the headlines from this tragic event. End summary.

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Further Developments in Murder Case  
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2.(U) Turkish police detained ten suspects in the April 18 murder of two Turkish citizens and one German national who worked at a Christian bookstore in Malatya. One of the suspects was originally thought to be a fourth victim because he jumped out of the building and went to a hospital for treatment. Television images showed police wrestling one man to the ground and leading several young men out of the building in handcuffs. Unconfirmed press reports stated that some of the suspects, who were high school graduates preparing for college entrance exams, had notes in their pockets stating, "We did this for the motherland." A Turkish National Police (TNP) contact told us no group has claimed responsibility. He said there is no evidence of a link to Turkish Hizbulah or other known organizations. Police have heightened security at churches and synagogues in some provinces but there appears to be no coordinated national security plan. A group of 150 marched in Istanbul yesterday with candles and banners stating, "We Are All Christians."

3.(SBU) Three German Embassy officers are traveling to

Malatya to assist the family of the German victim, Tilman Geske. The Human Rights Association (HRA) told us Geske's wife applied to the Malatya Governor's office for permission to bury Geske in Malatya's Armenian cemetery. The Governor's office, according to HRA, is concerned that Geske's burial in Malatya might create further tension. One of the other bodies was taken to Elazig for burial. The third body will be taken to Izmir for burial on Saturday.

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Amcit Christians Fear Copycat Attacks  
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4.(C) Three Amcit Protestants called the Embassy on April 19 to express fears of copycat attacks. Brad Foreman, a Bolu-based businessman who is a Christian but does not consider himself a missionary, told us that he fears that "one wacko could do the same thing to me and my family." Foreman said he expected the death threats he received two years ago would start again. Recently, he had experienced only legal and bureaucratic harassment. Foreman hoped high-level GOT officials and military officers would publicly condemn the murders, urge tolerance toward Christians, and attend any funerals. Chris Pestal, a Protestant who lives with his Turkish wife in Konya, told us he is "laying low" to avoid possible copycat attacks. Pestal said that most of Konya knows that he is Christian even though he never proselytizes.

5.(C) We urged these contacts to call local police if they felt threatened, despite their reservations that police are antagonistic toward Christians. We also sent them copies of Embassy Warden messages, and agreed to stay in email and

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telephone contact.

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GOT Sends Mixed Messages  
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6.(SBU) Following the murders, Minister of Interior Aksu expressed sadness and condemned the assassinations. Aksu said the attack was against "beraberlik" ("being together"). In a statement to the press, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) deplored the attack. Diyanet High Board member Professor Saim Yeprom said, "Islam never approves of murder" and considers killing a person unjustly as akin to killing all humanity. In contrast, MOJ DG of Legislation Guney reportedly complained in parliament of the growth of missionary activities in Turkey, which he compared to missionary activity during the last days of the Ottoman Empire. Guney reportedly stated there were at least 22 unauthorized Christian churches in and around Ankara.

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Media Expresses Shock, Calls for Tolerance  
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7.(SBU) Coverage of the murders dominated print and broadcast media. Mainstream media compared the killings to the recent assassination of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink and the murder of a Catholic priest in Trabzon last year, and characterized the crimes as part of a plot against Turkey's image and stability. Daily "Vatan" wrote that, just as in the Dink and Santoro cases, "Young people controlled by dark forces have committed a savage murder."

8.(SBU) Most columnists attributed the brutal attacks to a climate of increasing intolerance. According to "Hurriyet's" Ertugrul Ozkok, what happened in Malatya was the "collective responsibility" of Turkey. He stressed that Turkey could not wash its hands of the incident merely by blaming Turkish Hizbulah. "Radikal's" Murat Yetkin asked all Turks to end the practice of using religion as a political tool. "Sabah" columnist Mehmet Barlas, noting the string of murders

including the Catholic Priest's stabbing and the Dink assassination, wrote that it is time for the state and civil society to criticize themselves for contributing to the creation of this "violent, intolerant atmosphere."

9.(SBU) Some Islamic-oriented press tied the murders to politics. "Zaman" columnist Ali Buluc argued that the incident was a "provocation" related to the upcoming presidential elections. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) was being "dragged into an environment of violence, provocation and lack of tolerance."

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GOT's Policies Pressure Christians  
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10.(C) Our human rights contacts agree that of all of Turkey's non-Muslim religious groups, Christians tend to draw the most suspicion and hostility from the Turkish state and public. An EU Commission officer told us that many Muslim Turks harbor suspicions about Christians because all public secondary school students take religious courses that, in general, portray negatively non-Sunni faiths. Christians are associated with the Crusades, the Russian invasions of eastern Anatolia in the late 19th century and 1915, and European attempts to carve up the Ottoman Empire after World War I. She believes the Turkish state, and many Turkish citizens, still suffer from a "paranoia of missionaries who are stealing the religion of Turkish citizens." This paranoia was reflected by the Diyanet's 2005 public anti-missionary campaign that included a nationally-delivered sermon that depicted missionaries as part of a foreign plot to "steal the beliefs of our young people."

11.(C) EU country contacts told us the murder will give further ammunition to those in Europe who argue that Turkey's Islamic faith and intolerance toward other religions render it unqualified for EU membership. "This is the number-one argument used by opponents of Turkish membership," a Dutch diplomat commented. Our contacts said no matter who

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committed the murders, the event demonstrates that religious freedom is one of the weakest areas in the GOT's reform efforts.

12.(C) Comment: With all eyes fixed on the presidential election's approaching climax, the public debate following this triple-murder may be short-lived. As encouragingly constructive as many of the commentaries have been, the current highly charged political climate may not be conducive to genuine reflection or reform. We will urge the GOT to use this tragedy to promote greater tolerance, as we did the Dink murder. End summary.

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WILSON